

How Learners' Needs Affect Syllabus Design

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To ensure some success for ESL learners, teachers need to determine what each learner needs and wants to learn. This is done through needs analysis, before the course, during the course, or after the course has ended. The assessment may use standardized tests or other alternatives, like interviews with learners, group discussion with other teachers who have the experience in handling the course, or through learner observation.

Granted that a needs assessment has been done, how will the result influence the design of the syllabus, (for instance, in Basic Communication Skills 1, a college freshman English course at Bukidnon State College). My discussion will deal with topics in basic English courses at my school.

Setting General and Specific Objectives

Nunan and Lamb (1996) have distinguished the terms and objectives, but both share something in common, which is, that they all describe what learners should be able to do as a result of instruction. They believe that all language programs should take their form of departure from the goals and objectives that have been derived from an analysis of learner needs. Vale et al. (1996:32) have also distinguished goals which are generally stated from the teacher's perspective and provide direction for the teaching and learning, and objectives which spell out what learners will actually be able to do. A good syllabus then is designed after a needs assessment has been done to set out the learning objectives which will guide the teacher.

Ways of Grouping Learners

I would like to discuss the contents, methodology, and evaluation sections of the syllabus by grouping learners according to the results of the needs assessment, which will show the language profile or the learners' learning strategies that they use and the learning purpose (Nunan and Lamb 1996). Once the information of learners' needs has been collected, the teacher can modify the existing syllabus. Under language proficiency, for instance, students will be grouped with those having oral skills but with little or no literacy skills; with those with specific affective language and communication needs; or with those who are approximating native-like proficiency.

Needs assessment can also show the learning strategies used by students. Adapting Willing's (1988) grouping, there are those who are concrete learners: those who like using games, pictures, films, video, cassettes; talking in pairs, and practising English outside the class. There are analytical learners: those who like to study grammar, and English books, and read newspapers, and who like to study alone, find their own mistakes, and work on problems set by the teacher. Others are communicative learners who learn by watching, listening to native speakers, talking to friends in English, and watching television in English. They also learn new words by hearing

them and by conversing. Others are authority-oriented learners who prefer that the teacher explain everything, and who write everything in notebooks, study grammar, learn by reading, and learn new words by seeing them. This group can be made independent by providing a parallel study skills course, hopefully weaning them away from teacher-centered learning.

The learning purpose can also be taken from the needs analysis so the learners can be grouped according to the purpose of using English for further study or for professional employment (Nunan and Lamb 1996). Shank and Terrill (1995) reinforce the importance of a needs analysis to ensure success for EFL/ESL learners. The needs assessment helps in the analysis of the learning styles, skill levels, and specific learning objectives. Teachers can use a variety of techniques, grouping strategies, and materials to help learners become successful, comfortable, and productive. For instance, in grouping strategies, needs analysis can help teachers learn about a learners' age, social background, educational background, and language ability. Some learners might not be comfortable working with others of higher status. Some might not want women as leaders. In these cases, teachers can encourage learners to try new activities, but be sensitive to potential difficulties arising from group work or pair work.

In addition, whole group activities are appropriate initially for beginning new classes during daily warm-up time. The teacher can focus the entire group on a theme that later involves various individuals and small group tasks. The teacher may also use small group activities which provides opportunities for students to use their language skills in a less intimidating atmosphere. These groupings can help the teacher with the selection, sequencing and grading of content, methodology task selection and sequence, and assessment and evaluation.

Content and Technique

In planning the units for the semester course, the teacher first determines the theme or area of interest, the unit objectives, and the contents that are necessary or desirable to carry out the final tasks. The teacher also plans the process, like determining the communication and enabling tasks that will lead to the final tasks. The teacher selects, adapts or produces appropriate materials for the learners, structures these materials, and sequences them to fit into the time allotments. Finally, the evaluation instruments and procedures are planned. All these are the results of the needs analysis which can be modified during the course, if not before the course begins.

For example, if the function or theme taught or learned is to describe people or describe physical characteristics, then the specific objectives for this unit might be to write a simple description of a person, give information orally describing a person, ask questions to find out the physical description of a person, or understand a simple written or spoken description, of a person. The activities can consist of the task in pairs or groups of asking and answering questions describing a person. The teacher can also use songs or videos to generate ideas. Linguistic forms can be vocabulary and grammar. Evaluation may be in written or spoken form, like describing the person. Questions can be written after which another student answers the questions based on a song which has been heard or a video which has been seen by the whole class.

Based on the needs analysis done by the teacher beforehand, there is already a knowledge of just what content to introduce, and what strategies to use. If the teacher knows that the L2 learners have the oral skills but not have developed their literacy skills, this can be the starting point for

the lesson. Once students have been eased into this talking or describing activity, they can then be introduced to the literacy skills.

Holt (1995) suggests techniques involving beginning level learners as active participants in selecting topics, language, and materials. One technique is to build on the experiences and language of learners by inviting them to discuss their experiences, and by providing activities that will allow them to generate language they have already developed. Teachers can also use learners as resources by letting them share their knowledge and expertise with others in the class. Enabling skills can be taught which can be applied to other content areas. A variety of techniques appealing to diverse learning styles can be included if a needs analysis has been done.

Conclusion

The strength of a syllabus based on students' needs first and foremost starts from where the students are and builds on their knowledge and experiences. It provides the basis for structuring the syllabus around the language proficiency, the learning preferences, and the purposes for learning the second language.

References

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